

I hope all is well and you are getting through this odd interlude in which we find ourselves. I hope that the light is coming at the end of the tunnel and we will be back to semi-normal soon! We have been working with the policy side of your shop, here-to-fore, but due to the great interest in Russia issues, I also wanted to also invite you to what should be a really fascinating Zoom webinar on Russian methods of dangerous foreign intervention in Libya and elsewhere. It will feature Candace Rondeaux of New America and Arizona State University, an expert on Russia's use of assets like the Wagner Group for these nefarious purposes. She will be joined by Mohammed Ali Abdallah, Special Advisor to the Libyan Prime Minister, who can provide the latest developments on the ground in Libya. (Both of their bios are attached.) Former Senator David Vitter will be moderating.

The webinar will be Friday, May 8, at 2:00 pm Eastern. It will last 45 minutes. To join the webinar, please just register through Zoom at the following link:

[https://us02web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN\\_lg35RxcVT9WC1-XVjJwhmg](https://us02web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_lg35RxcVT9WC1-XVjJwhmg)

After registering, you will receive a confirmation email containing information about joining the webinar.

Please submit questions beforehand or during the webinar by emailing Senator Vitter at — [dvitter@mercuryllc.com](mailto:dvitter@mercuryllc.com). When you do, please identify yourself and for whom you work.

The importance of this topic is underscored by two recent developments. First, the US military announced that Russian interference in Libya in support of warlord Khalifa Haftar is a more dangerous threat to U.S. interests there than ISIS. (See the excellent Washington Examiner article, attached.) Second, there are credible reports that the Wagner group recently used chemical weapons in Libya as Haftar's position deteriorates.

Finally, I am also including an op-ed from the Hill this week on Russian intentions.

Again, I really hope you can participate in this excellent upcoming webinar. Stay healthy!

Deirdre

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# Russia wants a frozen conflict in Libya

BY JAMES J. COYLE, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR — 05/04/20 12:00 PM EDT [129](#)

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As Libyan strongman Khalifa Haftar unilaterally announced his acceptance of the Libyan presidency, Russian reaction was predictable: Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov called for diplomacy. “In Moscow, we remain convinced that the only possible resolution in Libya can be through political and diplomatic communication between all parties, above all those in conflict,” he said. Russian sources said the Libyans must implement the proposals from the January 2020 Berlin conference.

What Russia did not mention was the support Haftar is receiving from the Kremlin itself. Haftar’s primary fighters are not Libyans, but Russian mercenary soldiers from the Wagner Group, the same “non-governmental unit” that Russia deploys in Ukraine and Syria to do its ground fighting. Neither does Russia call for all parties to accept the internationally-recognized Government of National Accord; nor does it insist that Haftar’s rebels lay down their arms. As for the Berlin conference, Russia has indicated its time is past: Instead of a UN-sponsored peace conference, Russia’s call for diplomacy includes the statement: “Russia remains in contact with all participants in the Libyan conference.”

We have seen this before. In Azerbaijan, Russia holds separate peace talks over the future of Nagorno Karabakh, instead of furthering the internationally mandated Minsk process. In Georgia, Russia insisted it would provide a peacekeeping force — until it used that peacekeeping force to fight in the 2015 war. Afterwards, Russia again insisted on diplomacy while recognizing the governments of the breakaway areas of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In Moldova, Russia keeps troops bivouacked in Transdniestria while calling for negotiations with the central government. In Ukraine, Vladimir Putin has issued a peace plan that calls for a peaceful end of that conflict — but Russia will not allow Kyiv to control its own borders until the Kremlin-backed rebels have their demands met. In Syria, Russia calls on the world community to recognize the central government of Bashar al-Assad, while it actively supports groups opposed to the legitimate governments of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

Now it begins again in Libya. Libya’s Interior Minister recently reported that Russia’s Wagner Group used a chemical nerve agent against government forces. Washington Institute’s Anna Borshchevskaya documents a deeper Russian involvement than merely supplying mercenaries. Haftar reportedly reached out to Moscow for support sometime around 2015. In exchange, he promised to give Russia energy deals and port access.

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Putin began providing Haftar with military advice, diplomatic support at the United Nations, and even its own printed money. In 2017 Moscow flew dozens of Haftar's wounded soldiers to Russia for treatment. The U.S. military believes that either Russian mercenaries or Haftar loyalists used Russian air defense systems to shoot down an American drone outside Tripoli last November. Yet, being able to operate a Russian air defense system is a high-end skill that not many mercenaries have, and raises questions about the full extent of Russia's presence there.

Russia has pushed the West out of the Caucasus, made an attempt to peel Turkey away from NATO, seeks to use its energy policies to make Europe dependent on its good graces. The Caspian and Black Seas have become Russian lakes. With a major naval base in Syria, if Russia succeeds in becoming the indispensable actor in Libya, Putin will have succeeded in gaining control of the Eastern Mediterranean.

Despite the overwhelming evidence of Russia's involvement on the rebel side, Moscow maintains correct relations with the Government of National Unity. This gives it the veneer of being merely an interested bystander instead of an active participant in the conflict. Russia has used the same tactic in Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. If the West wants to maintain a presence east of Italy, it needs to take the following steps:

1. Reject all claims of Russian impartiality until Russia ceases to arm and support the rebels;
2. Insist that any peace conference be sponsored by the United Nations, and not by the Kremlin;
3. Implement the 2011 UN mandated arms embargo on all side in the conflict; and
4. Ensure that any peacekeeping force be drawn from non-aligned countries.